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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the online services provided by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, from the perspective of a psychology professor at Blue Ridge Community College in North Carolina. The author praises the ERIC site for its helpful links and virtual library, and also discusses ERIC's potential for a variety of users. He focuses on one of ERIC's primary strengths: its search engine/database. ERIC's search engine offers information on community college curriculum, institutional research, and policy research. In an evaluation of the ERIC system, the author finds its strengths to be: (1) immense size; (2) speed; (3) broad scope; (4) search results ordered by relevance; (5) clarity of search criteria; and (6) common-sense database search functions. Suggested modifications to the ERIC web site include: (1) eliminating the search confirmation screen; (2) modifying the structure of the search engine with increased user choice; (3) providing a way to filter items based on publication date; (4) improving currency; (5) providing for electronic submissions; (6) availability of full-text online retrieval; (7) developing a link to find articles similar to one's topic; (8) adding logical searching across fields; and (9) adding capacity to view multiple records at a time. ERIC is compared favorably with other search sites regarding content and accessibility, despite the fact that it does not yet offer online full-text retrieval. (AS)

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ERIC as Navigator: Comments from an ERIC Consumer

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Paper presented at the 79th annual convention of the American Association of Community Colleges, Nashville, TN, April 10, 1999

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B. H. Levin

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Presented at the 79th annual convention of the American Association of Community Colleges, Nashville TN, 10 April 99.

ERIC as Navigator: Comments from an ERIC Consumer

Bernard H. Levin[1]

I am professor of psychology and program head, administration of justice, at Blue Ridge Community College. Blue Ridge is a very decentralized institution, one where faculty routinely are involved not only in curriculum but also in policy development and institutional research. As a result I have come into contact with ERIC while wearing a variety of hats, in time-pressured, goal-oriented contexts.

My task this morning is to describe my experiences with the ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges, to discuss its potential for other users, and to make some suggestions. I recognize that the ERIC site has a good set of links, a helpful virtual library, and several other mentionable dimensions. However, this presentation will focus primarily on its search engine/database, as I believe that to be ERIC's signal strength.

I first came to use ERIC on a regular basis while working on my dissertation in the early 1980's. I was trying to detect similarities and differences between students at community colleges and proprietary schools. The standard education journals were of little help – the people whose work I was looking for did not publish in the traditional "scholarly" literature. Hundreds of hours spent scanning literally thousands of ERIC microfiches proved tiring – I often felt my eyeballs were dragging on the floor – but the payoff was high. Many of the sources I found through ERIC simply were not available elsewhere. It is safe to say that without ERIC I would not have been able to put together my dissertation and some subsequent related publications (e.g., Levin and Clowes, 1987; Cheng and Levin, 1995).

Although my task today is to talk about ERIC, I cannot resist a brief mention of the other leg on which my dissertation stood – an NCES product entitled "The National

Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972"
(http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nls72.html, now available on CD-ROM via
http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=94487). In NCES's words, "The National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS-72) is the grandmother of the longitudinal studies designed and conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education. At this point in time (1993), it is probably the richest archive ever assembled on a single generation of Americans" (http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nls72.html). When I was working on my dissertation, the National Longitudinal Study was a gift from god.

Both NCES and ERIC are indispensable resources for academic research, including dissertations. While NCES's data and reports are beyond compare, ERIC's breadth, size, and accessibility to the practitioner are unmatched. ERIC's primary applications at the community college are for research on curriculum, traditional institutional research, and policy research.

Research on Curriculum

Curriculum has a plethora of hot-button areas. Developmental studies is a perennial favorite. At Blue Ridge, both faculty and administrators worry about the extent to which developmental math serves as a gateway versus as a barrier. ERIC reminded us that we are hardly the first to worry about this. I did a search for three "keywords": developmental and [math or mathematics] and retention. Three seconds later, I had 104 citations. There was a mix of articles about retention within developmental courses and retention within the community college, but the articles were easy to sort.

General education, too, has been an issue – actually, a set of issues -- for a long time. General education has been a focus for debate at Blue Ridge since I arrived there in 1973, and has been discussed at painful length for more than 300 years. The ERIC collection reflects the amount of discussion about general ed – ERIC's search engine returned 8,430 documents that referred to "general education." The fourth citation returned on the

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hitlist (ED 307014) turned out to contain the information I was looking for. Coincidentally, it was written by Arthur M. Cohen, ERIC's Director.

Institutional Research

For a couple of decades I have been a member of the Southeastern Association for Community College Research. Through that organization, I have been fortunate to meet many institutional researchers and to discuss how their roles have evolved. Nearly all IR professionals have a heavy responsibility for number crunching, statistical projections, and report generation. The external reporting function has increased significantly over the years, as more states attempt to hold institutions accountable by means of educational outcomes assessment and performance-based budgeting.

Not only has the amount of reporting increased, but the complexity of the reporting has increased as well. As states lurch toward more "business-like" models of education, the importation of new mensuration concepts inevitably creates communication failures. What legislatures mandate, while well intentioned, does not necessarily translate well into how institutions operate.

As institutional researchers and their presidents attempt to cope with these externally induced changes, ERIC stands as a ready resource. Many emerging IR issues – both methodological and conceptual -- are already discussed within ERIC's database. For example, a search for "performance" and "reporting" and "budget" produced 510 documents representing experience in Georgia, Texas, Florida, Arizona, and others. There is no need to re-invent the wheel.

Policy Research

ERIC as a policy research resource is sometimes underestimated by administrators. I often use ERIC for policy research purposes. For example, Blue Ridge is looking at whether it should revise the relationship between student and advisor as the student selects the courses to be taken. Should we require students to gain the advisor's written approval prior to registration? If so, under what circumstances?

My initial search attempt ("advising" and "advisor") was not well focused. It yielded 748 references. The next attempt, ("advising" and "registration") was a little more manageable – only 231 documents. Using the ERIC web site, finding these hundreds of references took about 10 seconds from start to finish. The very first item in the search result page (ED 197770) looked like what I needed. The manual sorting of the 1980s would have required several days for a similar outcome.

Many other policy issues are on institutional front burners. A quick search for "distance learning" produced 1,408 items on the hitlist. "Affirmative action" produced 3,546 items. "Safety" produced 11,702 hits, while "crime" generated 4,948 hits. Narrowing my search, I looked for "crime" and "policy." This yielded 773 hits, many of which looked right on target. Pre-Web, I would have spent countless hours in a library; now I have a library at my fingertips. I complete these five searches within a two-minute period.

ERIC has resources other than the search engine. For example, when I had interest in distance learning policy, I clicked on ERIC's "Virtual Library" (http://www.gse.ucla.edu/ERIC/libraryset.html) and then on "Digests." A second later, there was a two-page summary of distance learning policy on my screen. By going back to the "Virtual Library" and then clicking on "Bibliographies" I gained access to a handy bibliography on distance learning, with a summary of each article. As a faculty member who teaches web-based and web-only courses, this information proved invaluable to me.

With the ERIC Web-site at hand, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, no need to take days off to spend at the library, no need to write educational policy by the seat of one's pants.

Evaluation of ERIC

There are schemes for evaluation of Web sites (e.g., http://itech1.coe.uga.edu/faculty/gwilkinson/AACE97.html and http://omni.ac.uk/agec/evalguid.html; although intended for CD-ROMS, http://www.rlc.dcccd.edu/lrc/critter.htm can, in part, apply to Web sites). However, there is no generally recognized set of standards (see, e.g., Gants, 1999). Further, since Web sites vary so much in intent and audience, many suggested criteria turn out to be irrelevant to specific sites. Generally accepted evaluation standards for Web sites are unlikely to emerge soon. For purposes of this presentation, I selected some dimensions of the Web site and functions that appear salient and related to user-friendliness.

Submitting Materials to ERIC

ERIC still requires hard-copy submissions, instead of permitting form-based or E-mail-based submissions. I have had a problem with only one of approximately 20 submissions. That problem was entirely due to my failure to follow the rather simple, clear instructions, and was resolved quickly with the help of a patient ERIC staff member.

ERIC's Strengths

1. ERIC's size -- it is immense.
2. ERIC's speed – for such a large site, it is very fast. One seldom waits any significant amount of time for search returns.
3. Its scope – nearly anything one might imagine about community colleges, their students, and their communities, is somewhere in ERIC.

4. Search results are ordered by relevance to the search criteria
5. When one clicks on any ERIC article, one's search criteria are displayed in context, in bold. There is no need to wade through hundreds of words of print.
6. The search engine used by ERIC, PLWeb Turbo, provides most common database search functions, a table of contents and FAQ's, and facially obvious forms. One need not be a propeller-head, or even read the instructions, in order to use ERIC effectively.

Suggested Modifications to the ERIC web site

As a confirmed Internaut, I have been afflicted by a crisis of rising expectations – now that I am accustomed to the ERIC Web-site, I want even more. I want it focused on my needs, highly customizable, and extremely user friendly. From my perspective, whenever a new user needs to read instructions or consult FAQ's or guess about how a site works, the site has failed. A Web site ought to be a resource rather than yet one more drain on one's limited time. Because of this, I start from the simple keyword search screen, rather than the wizard. Some suggestions follow:

1. Eliminate or provide a way to opt out of the search confirmation screen. It asks whether what you wanted to search for matches what you filled in on the previous form. I understand why it is there – naive users may find it useful – but it is an annoyance to people who know how to fill out search forms.
2. Modify the structure of the search engine. It would be more helpful to experienced searchers if it were to provide more user choice. I'd like a way to format and order the hitlist, to retrieve a user-selectable number of hits per search, and to search all fields simultaneously.
3. Provide a date on each item returned on a search, or another way to filter based on publication date. At present, the search form allows a search based on publication date, but one has only 3 criterion windows one can use for a search. Using one of those windows for "date" means only two criterion windows remain. Since ERIC is so large, this means one may get a hitlist of literally hundreds of citations with no easy way of guessing which ones are most likely to pay off. While one

can use multiple search terms in a single field, there has got to be a better way. Perhaps it would be helpful to allow the user to request a search ordered by publication date instead of relevance. I recognize that the wizard would help with both this and the previous suggestion, but the wizard brings too much baggage with it.

4. Improve currency. About a week ago, I entered my name as an ERIC search criterion. I came up with 17 cites, each for work I had done. However, two papers I had submitted to ERIC in August of 1998 and which I had received from ERIC as microfiche in February of 1999 are still not listed under either my name or the corresponding ERIC numbers. Even with this 8+ month delay, ERIC is more current than many other resources, but it would be helpful to speed up the process.
5. Provide for electronic submissions. Many databases are moving in this direction. It's not easy, but it is inevitable if ERIC is to remain viable.
6. Provide for full text on-line retrieval, to the extent copyright restrictions permit. Electronic submission will make full-text retrieval more feasible. When I search ERIC I am a bit frustrated that I can't get the full text on-line. On the other hand, I could easily order it on-line. Half a loaf, and relevant bread.
7. Provide a "find more articles like this one" link from hitlists.
8. Add logical searching across fields.
9. Add the capacity to view multiple records at a time, rather than having to click individually on each hit that is of interest.

How ERIC stacks up against other search sites

I use many other search sites in a variety of disciplines. Some are of comparable or larger size (e.g., the National Criminal Justice Reference Service www.ncjrs.org, Med-Line http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed, and FedStats http://www.fedstats.gov/search.html), while some are smaller, specialized sites (e.g., the Chronicle of Higher education http://chronicle.com/chronicle/archive.htm). The Chronicle search engine does a nice job, but access to its archives is limited to those who subscribe.

If an ERIC user is unable to locate information via the search engine, there are other alternatives within ERIC – toll-free and e-mail request services. The one time I tried the E-mail service I found it prompt and helpful. While other sites have comparable alternative services, often the response time and quality are not what one might hope for.

Despite my grumps about the limitations of ERIC, it stacks up pretty well. The other sites do not have significant improvements over what ERIC offers except that some, such as NCJRS, offer on-line full-text retrieval. No other site is comparable regarding content and accessibility.

Conclusion

The fundamental issue in Web-site evaluation is whether an average user can find quickly the information sought, without jumping through annoying hoops. With the exception of the "confirm" screen, ERIC does a fine job. When it comes to flexibility, ERIC is neither better nor worse than others. The cost is hard to beat.

When I first began writing this paper, I thought I would have to be guarded, that I would find too much to be critical about, more than I cared to dump out in a public forum. My concern began to fade as I asked peers in higher education as well as in other fields what they thought about the ERIC site. Even in unexpected places (e.g., police departments) there were only kind words. The harshest criticism I found came from a couple of cybergeeks who took issue with the color scheme.

Frankly, if all publicly funded projects worked as well as ERIC, I'd be a very happy camper.

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Note:

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http://www1.br.cc.va.us/levin/papers/AACC-99.htm

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ADJ 100 -- Survey of Criminal Justice

Competencies

Upon successfully concluding this course, the student will be able to:

1. Describe the setting and the principal contributions of key figures in the criminal justice system (law enforcement, judiciary, and corrections), historically and in the present.
2. Describe the processes and the structure of the criminal justice system; describe the path of an accused, from the officer perceiving him/her on the street through final appeals.
3. Define and use appropriately the technical vocabulary terms in the textbook.
4. Discriminate among the technical vocabulary terms in the textbook.
5. Competently discuss fundamental criminal justice issues from historical, social/cultural, behavioral, and legal perspectives.
6. Explain why simple solutions do not solve social problems, providing a variety of examples and evidence.
7. List and provide evidence on at least six reasons why the crime problem is not what the crime problem really is.
8. Prognosticate cogently regarding significant issues in criminal justice.
9. From the Internet, selectively gather data and information in order to answer conceptual as well as factual questions regarding the criminal justice system.
10. Read, write, listen, speak, think, compute, and work effectively in groups toward specified ends.
11. Write coherent, clear, and focused essays based on theory and evidence, without personal opinion, using correct spelling and grammar.
12. Evaluate objectively and document the performance of peers on group tasks.
13. Competently use Netscape 4.5+ or Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.0+, Norton Anti-Virus 5.0+, Microsoft Word97+, FrontPage Discussion Lists, listservs, and free web-mail with attachments.

In addition, the student will know less than when he/she entered the course. Specifically, the student will be able to describe the limits of our knowledge and demonstrate how those limitations affect policy choices.

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